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THE ANNUNCIATION  
By Botticelli

—Courtesy Carroll Galleries, London

## Current Art Topics

By "MAHLSTICK," London Correspondent

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AMONG the exhibitions that mark the slack-water interval before the high tide of the London and Summer Exhibitions the show of the National Portrait Society ranks probably as first in importance. The list of members is certainly very impressive, for in it we have the names, even though on the walls we do not meet their works, of such notables as John Singer Sargent, William Orpen, P. A. de Lazlo, Max Lieberman, John Lavery, Max Klinger, Y. Sorolla, Anders Zorn, etc., etc. To such a galaxy of great names Mr. Augustus John seems a sort of anti-climax, in the role of President. However, so it is, and from this fact it may be guessed that the work shown

on the walls tends towards the extremist and modernist schools of painting. The older tradition of Portraiture is nevertheless well represented and maintained in the works of Gerald Kelly, Howard Somerville, R. G. Eves, Lazlo, Lavery and others, and more or less remembered even by experimentalists like Strang, Ranken, Fiddes, Watt, etc.

The President, Mr. Augustus John, is represented, or rather is not represented, by the portraits of Madame Rejane, Captain Pringle and the "Lady with the Mantilla." The "Rejane" and the "Mantilla" canvas so nearly approach the dully normal that, unsigned, they would not attract more than the notice accorded to the padding of any minor



*VIRGIN WITH CHILD  
AND SAINTS  
By a Flemish Master of  
the Sixteenth Century*

—Courtesy Carroll  
Galleries, London

exhibition. The Rejane may easily be a likeness more or less, but what a heavy, unpleasant, ugly, uninspired thing it is. The great tragedienne looks and is dressed like a cook of the Victorian era; the utter indifference to all those elements of charm and emotion that must surely in life characterize the ensemble of such a woman has left the artist free to give us the fleshly residue with a certain force and conviction, and that is the utmost that can be said in the picture's favor. Even the critics are pushed to find qualities in it to justify their usual gush about "Augustus."

The "Mantilla" might almost be described as a bit of earnest work, but labored and heavy, and destitute of any apparent reason for doing it, except as a student's study. In the "Captain Pringle" we have Mr. John in

the limelight again, with his impudent flippancies of bad drawing, bad painting and bad taste; and here I think we may leave him, while we consider the work of "another Richmond in the field," to-wit, Mr. David Wolmark, whose portrait of Monsieur Davids is conceived and rendered on the lines of those figures made of strip-wood which our friends persuade to dance on a piece of cardboard, what time they dangle them thereon from a piece of string. I heard a plea put up for this preposterous effigy—that it would make a good poster—if to arrest the eye by offending it is a qualification for a poster, then we may grant that merit to Mr. Wolmark's work. It will be interesting to see how far this new adventurer along the road of eccentricity towards his goal of notoriety will get—it is

against him that the plan is losing much of its pristine freshness and effectiveness. It is reported of Matisse—whose bona fides I personally never believed in, as readers of this journal well know—that he now confesses that his career has been one of humbugging a gullible coterie of critics and their sheepish followers among the public. It has always been a mystery to me that so many painters expect to gain kudos by adopting the mannerisms of this or that painter, who happens to be the vogue of the moment. Sargent's miraculous dexterity and freedom of brush, venturing perilously near the brink of sloppishness at times, has not frightened feebler men from venturing in his footsteps, with results of inanity and emptiness displayed on the walls of every exhibition ad nauseam. And here we have in "Liza Looking Out," by Fairlie Farmer, a tiresome imitation of Wilson Steer's peculiar and always unpleasant paint, expressive though at times it may be, and again in David Alison's portrait we are greeted with a loud and blatant echo of Orpen. Modern painting, in its effort after novelty and individualism, and its resolve to be expressive rather than beautiful and ordered, cannot safely in the majority of its manifestations be made the basis of a style, a school or a vogue. But the older and more academic painters and schools produced pictures frankly painted in this or that style, after this or that master, according to this or that formula of technique, subject and composition, which are frequently little behind their models and exemplars in merit and value. A picture in the style of Botticelli, Fra Angelico, Raphael, Velasquez, Titian, Rembrandt, Watteau, Reynolds or Rosetti, even by the most mediocre of craftsmen, is bound to contain certain elements of beauty—enough to justify a habitation somewhere. But who can think of indifferent imitations of Whistler, Monet, Manet, Cezanne, Collings, Sargent, Mancine, etc., etc., without a shudder? Many of us are capable of a shudder in presence of some of the originals! The grand idea of Beauty which o'erarched the whole realm of Art, in all ages and all phases, until there came the great revolt of the French Impressionists, who professed other aims and pur-

poses than the cult of the Beautiful in any hitherto accepted sense, this bedrock principle of Beauty did preserve the world from such foulness of color, line and pigment as disfigure the walls of many modern exhibitions; for instance, Ethel Walker's "Mother and Child," Flora Sims' "La Ballerina" and many others.

The exhibition contains, however, many sound, interesting and beautiful portraits by Gerald Kelly, W. B. Ranken, Howard Somerville, De Lazlo, Ambrose McEvoy, Connard, etc., works which one can imagine becoming heirlooms in the families of the sitters. How many of my readers have considered this question of modern experiments in painting and posterity? What is going to be the fate of the gaucheries of Modern Art, and more especially can we imagine that the travesties of humanity, as the President's "Captain Pringle," Wolmark's "M. David" or Ethel Walker's "Miss Ethel Zuna," or their like, will ever fill the places on our walls once graced by Vandyke, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Romney and all those limners of the past who strove to see and render the beauty and dignity of Humanity? The proposition answers itself—the inimitable grace of Reynolds' "Kitty Fisher," the feminine dignity and beauty of Gainsborough's "Mrs. Siddons," and the sordid realisms of the "Madame Rejane" in this exhibition. At the Grafton Galleries that artistic menagerie, "The Allied Artists," are on view, having moved from the Albert Hall, where they made their debut some years ago. To the dim recesses of its upper galleries seekers after adventure were wont to wander, and strange were the tales of what they had seen which they brought back. The distinctive principle of this body was the abolition of selection—anathema to them were selecting committees or hanging committees; all were invited to join, pay and exhibit, no one and no work was rejected, the only veto was that of the police.

The fact that such a society has survived points to the unlimited field always existing for those who live by exploiting the vanity of their fellow creatures. I must confess that I have not yet faced the ordeal of the "Allied

Artists," but I may do so in their present home. I gather somewhat from slight hints in the press that the society has fallen away from its pristine fervor, and that the reprobated deadly sin of one Artist in this connection—I advisedly only borrow the term—presuming to condemn or judge any pictorial effort other than his own, has in some sort of guise crept into the fold of the elect. Mr. Konody, that quick-change critic, experiences "ecstatic thrills" as he contemplates the color problems of a Mr. Clark. He admits they are in a language of which he does not know even the alphabet, that they signify nothing to him but—thrills. And this is what the vision-revealing art of Michael Angelo, Botticelli and Rembrandt has come to—daubs of professedly dumb inarticulate paint on a piece of canvas!!

But let us get away from this debacle of all those ideals which materialized in the Art of the Past and are the Heirlooms of our Race. At such times of weariness I always, to renew and refresh my faith, go to the Primitives, those "Sons of the Morning Star" of Art, whose works are visions and revelations of Beauty, of Romance and "other-worldliness," "trailing clouds of glory," which, alas! seem to fade more and more from humanity's ken as the ages roll on. Wordsworth's seer-like poem on "Childhood" might well be the text of the life of Art. If the ultimate purpose and crown of Art is the revelation of the spiritual through the material, then I maintain that that Crown and Purpose have found their highest attainment in the Primitive

Christian Art of the West. These early painters, in their outlook, in their concepts, in the undoubting and unhesitating directness with which they tell their story, and state in form and color its facts—and all its facts—with equal emphasis and precision, have a power over us that is spiritual in its quality as is that of a child with its unsullied faith in the truth and goodness of the world in which it finds itself. I suppose I am somewhat fanatical in my cult of these Primitive Masters, but what is there in Post Renaissance Art which can compare with the ecstatic emotion of the "Annunciation," by Botticelli, here reproduced? I go further, what is there in Greek Art that surpasses in plastic inspired movement the Virgin receiving the Great Message or approaches it in spiritual significance? At its highest Grecian Art but stood for the beauty of the Body and the power of the Intellect, for the apotheosis of Man, the thinking animal, the crown and consummation of the physical order are still but the "Dust of the Earth," to which he will return.

Measured in spiritual values, Greek Art can show us nothing comparable to this and in terms of Art nothing to surpass it. I had hoped to further enlarge on the significance of these early Masters' work, one other of which is reproduced, how far, for instance, the progress of science and knowledge compensates to the world for the loss of the faith and single-mindedness which made such Art possible. Ruskin said "not at all," and the subtle intellect of the Orient echoes not-at-all.

MAHLSTICK.